The Backcountry Grows Up

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The 1770s marked a major turning point for North Carolina. At mid-decade, of course, the dawning of the American Revolution changed everything for all of the colonies, but before that, North Carolina experienced its own crisis when the Regulator movement boiled over in 1771. Tensions over corrupt local officials, the location of a permanent state capital, taxation to build Tryon Palace, and other issues also reflected a major shift. Growth in the colony's Piedmont—different from its older eastern settlements in politics, geography, economics, religion, and basic viewpoint—had created east-west power and rivalry issues that replaced earlier north-south tensions in the Coastal Plain. By the 1830s, western counties would be in near revolt over the state constitution and legislative representation.

European colonists mostly settled in the Coastal Plain until about 1730. They often used rivers to travel and ship goods. The fall line—the border between the Coastal Plain and the Piedmont—had a series of waterfalls and rapids that made transportation difficult. Such geography discouraged people from moving into the backcountry, as people called the area beyond the falls to the west. But the land was rolling and rich. It had shallow streams and narrow rivers, which, while not useful for boats, provided the region with plenty of water and good sites for building mills. Siouan-speaking American Indian tribes like the Catawba had long lived in the area, but European diseases, such as smallpox, already had killed many of their members, as had wars with neighboring tribes. Only a few hundred Indians lived in the area when large numbers of Europeans arrived, and initially most were friendly with their new neighbors.

The first European settlers to enter North Carolina's Piedmont starting in the 1730s were English people who had lived in the eastern part of what was then a royal English colony. But many of the Piedmont's rivers—such as the Yadkin/Pee Dee, Catawba, and Broad—flowed south into South Carolina, making communication and trade with North Carolina's eastern region difficult. As a result, most backcountry settlers came from other colonies to the north. Two roads became the major routes for settlers. The Great Indian Trading Path was a trail that American Indians had used for centuries. It started near Petersburg, Virginia, and ran through the Piedmont to modern Mecklenburg County. Virginians began to use the path to move to North Carolina in the mid-1700s. The other major route was the Great Wagon Road, which brought people from Pennsylvania and Maryland through Virginia's Shenandoah Valley into the colony.

Most of the people who settled the North Carolina interior were not English in origin but from other areas in Europe. The Scots-Irish (or Ulster Scots) were the descendants of people from Scotland, mostly Presbyterians, who had first moved to the Ulster province in Northern Ireland seeking economic opportunities. Later, high land rents and other

issues related to English policy persuaded many Scots-Irish people to move to America, where they settled primarily in Pennsylvania. Land there was scarce and expensive, so by the 1740s, many of them were setting out for Maryland, Virginia, and eventually North Carolina, where there were relatively few settlers and plenty of good land.

A lot of Germans living in Pennsylvania moved to the North Carolina Piedmont and later the Mountains for many of the same reasons as the Scots-Irish. They were mostly Lutheran or German Reformed, though in 1753, Moravians began arriving in modern Forsyth County. Most of the German immigrants settled together and preserved their customs and language. Over time, many began to adopt English-sounding names and switched to speaking English.

Because the Scots-Irish and Germans had different cultures and religious traditions, they tended to keep to themselves and had little contact with one another. Later, other groups with English origins joined them, again moving from the north. One large group was made up of Quakers who settled in modern-day Guilford County. Another large English group of settlers, mostly Baptist, came from central Virginia.

Americans of African origin arrived in the Piedmont in small numbers during the colonial period. Most of them were enslaved and traveled into the area with their owners. Many of the European settlers living in the backcountry had never owned slaves before, but some individuals began to purchase them to increase their wealth. Most backcountry settlers, however, were small farmers and could not afford to buy someone who was enslaved. And some people, including the Quakers, opposed slavery for religious and moral reasons.

During this period, North Carolina's population exploded from around 35,000 people in 1730 to around 180,000 in 1770. Much of that growth took place in the Piedmont. As the population of the backcountry grew, so did the number of towns. Most people lived on small farms, but they needed towns to sell their produce, buy supplies, and do business. North Carolina's original leaders, the eight Lords Proprietors, had encouraged the construction of towns when they founded the colony, thinking that without towns, the colonists living on the wild frontier might become uncivilized.

By the American Revolution, North Carolina's colonists had made eleven attempts to establish backcountry towns, but not all were successful. Many of the communities grew along the two main roads into the Piedmont. People founded towns to serve as centers for county governments, to encourage trade, or to maintain their cultural traditions. As the population of the backcountry grew, colonial officials often created new counties. In 1730 North Carolina had eleven counties; by 1760 there were twenty-four, and another eight had formed by the Revolution. Each county needed a place, usually located near its center, to conduct government business. Officials would build a courthouse and jail at this center of business. Landowners hoped to make money by creating towns at the courthouse site through opening taverns and selling lots to people for houses and businesses.

In the 1750s and 1760s, towns begin to spring up across the backcountry. Settlers built a courthouse in what became Salisbury to serve as the county seat of Rowan County, created in 1753. The town that became Hillsborough was the county town for Orange County, which was established in 1752. Individuals founded Charlotte to be a home for a court for Mecklenburg County, established in 1762. These towns grew at different rates. Salisbury initially was the largest town because it was built where the Trading Path and the Wagon Road crossed. A large number of people moved to that area seeking safety during the French and Indian War (1754–1763), when bands of American Indians allied with the French regularly attacked colonists.

The three court towns had stores, taverns, craft shops, and schools. On court days, people came into town to trade, buy supplies, and socialize with friends. Salisbury had a large German population and even had a newspaper printed in German. Charlotte had a number of Scots-Irish residents, and although it was small and grew slowly, it was home to Queens College, the only college the colonial government ever chartered.

When the time came to divide a large county into two smaller ones, some towns did not survive because they were no longer in a good location near the center of either county. This situation happened to Richmond, which was founded in 1774 to be the seat of Surry County. Besides the court, Richmond had only one store and three taverns. When Surry County was divided a few years later, and the court moved, Richmond no longer had enough business to survive.

Trade was another reason for founding backcountry towns. Residents of Anson County tried to start two towns on the Pee Dee River. But too few people lived in the area to support a town, so plans for Gloucester (1753) and Prince George Town (1759) did not develop. Harrisburg (ca. 1760), a village on the Trading Path in Granville County, did survive, because it had a tavern that served the large numbers of people passing through.

By far the most successful trading town, Cross Creek, also began around 1760 and served as a gateway between the Piedmont and Coastal Plain. It differed from other towns because it was not founded by any individual but developed around a gristmill. Because it was not planned, Cross Creek did not have a regular grid system of streets like the other towns. It was located above the falls of a creek leading into the Cape Fear River. People from throughout the backcountry sent their goods to Cross Creek for shipment to the coast, and several mills, a brewery, a tanyard, craft shops, taverns, stores, and houses sprang up. Later, Cross Creek and Campbellton, a town on the other side of the falls established by Highland Scots living in the Sandhills region, joined together to become Fayetteville.

One group of backcountry towns was cultural in origin. In 1753 a group of German Moravians bought a large tract of land that they named Wachovia. There they built three towns: Bethabara (1753), Bethania (1759), and Salem (1766, modern Winston-Salem). The Moravians were well known for their craftsmanship and their good schools, and people traveled great distances to their towns to buy products or deliver their children to be educated. Their well-constructed buildings have a German appearance, and many still

stand. Salem also had a running-water system that President George Washington inspected during a 1791 visit.

Towns played an important role in settling North Carolina's backcountry. As the population of the Piedmont grew, doubling between 1765 and 1775, people relied on towns more and more as centers of government, trade, and culture. By the end of the colonial period, towns had become a significant part of backcountry life and helped shape the region's settlement. But by the 1770s, settlers had occupied the best land. Seeking better opportunities, other settlers began looking even farther west, to the Mountains.

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